



Aruba welcomes two unusual visitors for a short and inspirational visit

Zalman Korf and Israel Slaviaticky came to Aruba not to lay on the beaches, as do most visitors, nor to partake of fine meals or dabble in the casinos, they came with a purpose. Zalman and Israel are Rabbis-in-training, part of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement among Hassidic Jews. Chabad (צְבָד) is a Hebrew acronym for "חִכּוּמָה Chochmah, בִּנָה Binah, דַעַת Da'at" (Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge).^[11] Lubavitch, taken from the Russian Любавичи, (Lubavichi), is the name of the town that served as the movement's headquarters for over a century.

Zalman and Israel, both twenty-three years old, are part of a foreign outreach program set up in 1947 by Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, longtime leader of the ultra-Orthodox sect. During their five days on the island, they spent their time meeting with various members of the local Jewish community with the gentle mission to inspire and reinforce the faith amongst the members of this small congregation. Aruba is one of many places that is far from the mainstream Jewish communities, often making practicing Judaism a challenge. “Our Rabbi worries about assimilation, and the other problems that such small, far-flung communities confront,” reports Zalman, “and he sends us out to help them strengthen “Jewish Identity,” and to teach them how to do this. Not all communities have a Rabbi to lead them, and so we are here to provide materials and answer questions.” Zalman grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Israel came there two years ago from Antwerp, Belgium to study at the Central Lubavitch Yeshiva.

Until just recently, Aruba had the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Marcelo Bater, originally from Argentina, who was part of the community for four years. He and his wife have joined a congregation in Florida, because he wants his young children to grow up with other young Jewish children. This is a constant dilemma for the members of Aruba’s Temple Beth Israel, as they are not only a small congregation, but an island community as well. It is common practice for the youth of the community to travel far away for study, and then stay away because of work or marriage.

After their time in Aruba, Zalman and Israel departed for over a week in Curacao, where they will have the opportunity to worship in the first synagogue established in the western hemisphere, and from there to Bonaire, which has a tiny community of less than ten families. In Aruba, they visited with just over twenty families, and many were not available because of the summer vacation. “We really did not know what to expect from Aruba,” reveals Zalman, “I found it very encouraging and inspiring during our time here.” One family, the Alberts of Saveneta, converted to Judaism years ago, “and the extents to which they go to pursue the faith was very impressive. It was revealing to see some of the hardships that Aruba’s Jews experience; the Alberts family had many questions for us.” Along with advice and inspiration, the pair brought with them a number of books about Judaism that face these questions in either a practical, philosophical, or inspirational manner.

The young rabbinical students, along with nearly 300 others are now traveling around the globe to remote Jewish outposts on all continents, an annual project of Chabad. Zalman’s younger brother, Moshe, is spending the summer in Caracas, Venezuela, not only conferring with the local community, but also working at a Jewish summer camp. Zalman and Israel were assigned the ABC islands, and though Zalman said they came to Aruba without any expectations of what they would find here, “It was gratifying to see the determination of many of the community members. We were surprised that despite the difficulties inherent in such a community to maintain their faith, they are very involved and committed to maintaining their “Jewish Identity.”